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Before the First Draft: Cultivating Inspiration and Creative Insight in the Classroom

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Inspiration is mysterious. As writers, we sometimes cannot articulate why we are drawn to something; we know only that it feels charged and full of potential. Some of the ways we discuss inspiration underscores this mystery—inspiration “strikes,” or the muse visits on some schedule that is impossible to predict—and authors’ introspective descriptions of the creative process often nod to the unknown as a significant aspect of creative invention. Take, for instance, this description from novelist and short story writer Lauren Groff, who describes a sinkhole near her home called the Devil’s Millhopper. Occasionally, an animal would fall into it and, she writes, “[y]ears later, the bones would be spat out all at once . . . Some stories emerge after random events fall into a writer’s subconscious, only to connect years later when they are tossed onto the page as a whole story” (212). Indeed, it is no easy task to pin down what happens when we are in the midst of developing an idea for a new creative piece. The process can feel enigmatic, and outside of our grasp of full understanding. Perhaps this is why it is often relegated to a minor topic in the creative writing classroom.

However, the work that takes place *before* committing writing to the page is significant and essential. In fact, of Malcolm Cowley’s four stages of writing fiction—developed from insights gleaned from a significant selection of *The Paris Review*’s in-depth interviews with authors—two of them take place before the first draft is written. In the first stage, the writer finds the germ of the story and in the second, the writer begins to shape that germ into a story during a “period of more or less conscious meditation” (7). Only then is the first draft written, followed by revision.¹ Additionally, findings from neuroscience about the organization and functioning of the brain give a glimpse into the biological processes that underlie Cowley’s observations, further illuminating this crucial, but often overlooked, work.

¹ These stages are similar to several other accepted theories on the creative process, including those developed by Graham Wallas and Arthur Koestler.

Traditional creative writing pedagogy tends to focus on developing skills through practice, feedback, and revision, with the workshop as a central component. It centers on Flannery O'Connor's sentiment: "The only way, I think, to learn to write short stories is to write them, and then to try to discover what you have done" (102). This *is* a compelling way to help students develop their craft. However, as Graeme Harper writes, "the artifacts that emerge during and at the end of any instance of creative writing capture only a relatively small portion of the total experiences that ensued during the creative writing" (14). Focusing on the end product, then, to the exclusion of the larger experience, is a significant missed opportunity. Attending to the complex steps that come before writing is essential, and I argue that more time spent on these activities helps students navigate a broader base of the creative process. This shift in emphasis gives students the opportunity to practice the skills of idea generation and development more deliberately, to witness curiosity as an engine for inspiration, and to create consequential work that finds its impulse in innovative and meaningful sources.

Still, asking writers to make a largely internal (and elusive) process external, so that it might be looked at, discussed, and plumbed for possibilities presents some significant pedagogical challenges. I considered these issues, as well as those that arose from research into the science of insight, and experimented with techniques in the classroom for several years before developing English 301: Writer as Explorer, an upper level undergraduate fiction seminar that heavily values the early stages of the process.² After teaching it for several semesters, I conducted a research study using students' narrative responses to gather data at significant points in the process. I analyzed this data, along with students' drafts, to identify patterns. In what follows, I will detail relevant findings from neuroscience to lay the groundwork for this approach, describe some of the techniques I have used to shift focus to the early stages, and share preliminary findings from my research in the classroom. While my focus is on the process of writing fiction, the foundational ideas are relevant for writers engaged in any creative writing process.

THE SCIENCE OF INSIGHT

Findings in neuroscience, specifically how experiences are stored and accessed in the brain, can illuminate some aspects of the creative process.³ This starts with some generally accepted understandings in neuroscience: Memories are encoded in neurons. Representations are distributed across many neurons and each neuron stores many items (Churchland 161). When you remember

² There are many other approaches that emphasize the early stages of the process, including Graeme Harper's "The Unworkshop" and Trent Hergenrader's "Steampunk Rochester," both detailed in *Creative Writing Innovations*.

³ Margaret A. Boden details the knowledge and limitations of research on creativity well in "Creativity as a Neuroscientific Mystery" in *Neuroscience of Creativity*, discussing what neuroscience can and cannot reveal about creativity, the kind of information processing involved, and the type of creativity conducive to experimentation.

an experience, you are not accessing one neuron, the way you might click on one icon to access a document on your computer. Rather, you are activating an entire group of neurons.

Each individual neuron is selective; it is primed to have a reliable and robust response to a particular detail or quality, also called a microfeature (Churchland 160). Neurons, however, are not singular in their responses. While they respond most strongly to a specific microfeature, they also respond with less vigor to related microfeatures (Churchland 178). As a result, memories are encoded on neurons that are responding, to varying degrees, to multiple microfeatures, and one memory will be spread across multiple neurons. Each individual neuron, then, is used repeatedly in different capacities.

Here is a (very) simple example: the first time you see your infant nephew's blue eyes, that hue is encoded onto a neuron that responds to that particular quality of blue. That neuron or others near it might carry similar experiences of that color: the clear blue of the ocean from your vacation three years ago, a glass gem that you had as a child, a section of stained glass you saw at an art museum last week. Those same neurons are also encoded with related details—perhaps a different shade of blue—that they respond to less vigorously. The experience of meeting your infant nephew has many other representations, such as the shape of his eyes, the smell of his skin, the sensation of his grasp on your finger, even the welling up of emotion. Those are encoded on other neurons that respond to those microfeatures. Each of those neurons also carry other representations, some quite similar and others less so. When you recall this moment, *all* of those neurons, with all of the details they carry that aren't directly related to that experience, are activated.

Clearly, association—how things relate to one another—underlies the very structure of the working brain. This is essential for creativity. Psychologists Liane Gabora and Aparna Ranjan note that, “It is this implicit knowledge of how things are related, indeed related in ways one may never have consciously noted, that is called upon in the creative process” (36). This is also what gives the creative process its enigmatic reputation. Characters, circumstances, or key actions can seem as though they have come from “out of the blue.” In fact, the mind is constantly taking in experience and forging associations that *make* something new. The brain is combining and recombining images, knowledge, memory, observation, facts—anything the writer has gathered while alert to the surrounding world and its sensory experience—and this can lead to a spark of interest and the formation of a significant idea.

Cowley's insights on the writing process suggests this organizational system of neurons. He writes of the first stage:

The germ of a story is something seen or heard, or heard about, or suddenly remembered; it may be a remark casually dropped at the dinner table . . . Or again it may be the look on a stranger's face. Almost always it is a new and simple element introduced into an existing situation or

mood; something that expresses the mood in one sharp detail; something that serves as a focal point for a hitherto disorganized mass of remembered material in the author's mind. (7)

Cowley makes clear that these modest elements of life experienced—an overheard remark, the observation of another's facial expression, new information or an anecdote—are precious materials in the mind. One detail can be the link that allows several to connect, even when they may have seemed only tangentially connected or even completely unrelated before.

Recent research suggests that when engaged in associative thinking—that unfocused, wandering mode of thought—*more* neurons are activated, including groups of associated neurons that respond to microfeatures that are only marginally relevant. Gabora and Ranjan call these groups of neurons neurds and argue that this broader activation has a profound effect:

This enables the next thought to stray far from the one that preceded it, while retaining a thread of continuity. The associative network is thereby not just penetrated deeply, but traversed quickly, and there is greater potential for representations to overlap in ways they never have before. Thus, the potential to unite previously disparate ideas or concepts is high. (31)

Thus, associative thinking allows for more possibility, unexpected connections between dissimilar ideas, and the opportunity for deeper or more complex associations. Other research supports the benefits of this shift. One study, for instance, found that engaging in an undemanding task when taking a break from puzzling through a problem increases creative problem solving, thus concluding, “conditions that favor mind wandering also enhance creativity” (Baird 1121). Many scientific studies support this. One found improved cognitive function in participants who took breaks to interact with the natural world (Berman 1217). Another found that complex matters were better handled by unconscious thought—when people “slept on it” or deliberately put the problem aside for a time (Dijksterhuis 1005).

It may come as no surprise, then, that incubation seems to play an essential role in the creative process. Defined by Graham Wallas as the “voluntary abstention from conscious thought on any particular problem,” incubation is the time in which one takes a break from the creative problem and shifts attention to something else (86). Ut Na Sio and Thomas C. Ormerod's recent meta-analysis on research regarding incubation reveals that it is real and beneficial—taking a break does, in fact, help to elicit new ideas. They write:

We suggest that the positive incubation effects found with creative problems are a direct reflection of their multiple-solution nature. When solving a creative problem, individuals benefit from performing a wide search of their knowledge to identify as many relevant connections as possible with the presented stimuli. Each time individuals reapproach the problem, they

improve their performance by extending the search to previously unexplored areas of their knowledge network. Incubation appears to facilitate the widening of search of a knowledge network in this fashion. (107)

By downshifting thought away from the problem, we allow our minds to branch out further, and dredge up more—and perhaps more disparate—possibilities for connection. Writers’ anecdotes cite the importance of this shift. Cowley notes this in his analysis of interviews with writers. In describing his second stage of writing, where the idea shapes up, Cowley observes, “Often the meditation continues while the writer is engaged in other occupations: gardening, driving his wife to town . . . or going out to dinner” (9).

Since the creative problem exists, your brain is primed to be alert to those details that are potentially useful to puzzling through it. Consider the study by Colleen Seifert and others that found people are more likely to remember problems they did not solve over problems that they did. Based on their data, they suggest that the failure to solve a problem can create “failure indices,” easily accessible memories of that problem, which put you at the ready for solutions (119). As neuroscientists John Kounios and Mark Beeman summarize:

This memory is much more than a mental note. It energizes all of your associations to the information in the problem, sensitizing you to anything in your environment that might be relevant, potentially including the solution. Thus, when you encounter something that’s even remotely associated to the problem—a word, a sound, a smell—it can act like a hint that triggers an insight. (102)

Often, we come across these “hints” without being consciously aware of them as part of the solution. Instead, we experience a moment of insight—the solution or something that leads to it—often separated from the awareness of the process that got us there.

Kounios and Beeman emphasize the way our thinking is influenced by context, that “every piece of information stored in your brain has associative connections to other pieces of information” and that, “individual associations wax and wane in strength” based on your thoughts and surroundings (101). So, depending upon where you are or what you are doing, some associations might be stronger than others. They go on to state that when we are at an impasse, shifting our contexts can free our minds of the thoughts and ideas keeping us stuck:

Exposing yourself to a variety of experiences or thoughts—especially unusual ones—during a break will help you to dismiss these unproductive thoughts and increase your chances of encountering an insight trigger. (109)

By urging ourselves out of our day-to-day thought patterns and physical routines, we invite novelty and this offers up opportunities to come upon solutions. In these instances, perhaps we are

activating more neurons, including ones that we do not frequently use, and bringing them forth so that all of their representations become available for possible associations and connections.

The work of creativity has clear biological underpinnings, and we can see that it is constant and evolving, even when we are not actively engaged in writing, or even consciously aware of it. To consider inspiration as merely something that “strikes” or “visits,” is to render the writer passive, biding time and waiting. This complex internal process, however, is prompted by outside sources. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes, “Because we are used to thinking that creativity begins and ends with the person, it is easy to miss the fact that the greatest spur to it may come from changes outside the individual” (31). Writers’ thoughts are inspired by, feed off of, and otherwise interact with their contexts. Paying attention to these social aspects of creativity and finding ways to enhance them can nourish the writing process.

THE APPROACH IN WRITER AS EXPLORER

Using these findings, I developed Writer as Explorer. The deep exploration described here is best suited for writers who have some experience writing fiction, practicing craft, and engaging in a workshop process. This advanced level can be a critical juncture, one where a challenge to explore away from the page and the guidance to consider that exploration and navigate back to it can result in significant growth. Still, some of the activities can be extracted and modified for beginning writers or to create a less immersive experience.

For context, I teach at a small, selective liberal arts institution. English 301: Writer as Explorer serves English majors working toward a degree in our writing concentration and creative writing minors. In this class, students follow a pressing preoccupation through research, collect and process this information in an archive, consider their findings to coax out the fictionally evocative bits, and write 35-45 manuscript pages of fiction—a novella or a collection of stories—that grows from their exploration.

In designing the schedule, I took into account the need for time in the early stages of the process. This time is necessary to take in new representations, allow the neural process to do its natural combining and recombining with these new representations, and allow for incubation. As a result, students spend over a third of the semester preparing to write their manuscript. Once they do start writing, they proceed slowly. Students engage in two developmental workshops, sharing their works-in-progress at five pages in and half way in. For these workshops, they prepare brief statements that articulate what they are currently pondering or puzzling through, and these accompany their drafts. Discussion at these developmental workshops involves active participation of the author, and focuses on readers’ questions and expectations, as well as suggestions for possibilities going forward. Students eventually

engage in traditional workshops of their entire manuscripts in small groups, and they meet with me to discuss revision strategies. For their graded portfolio, they revise their manuscript for two significant issues and develop a plan for more comprehensive revisions.

The impetus for this semester long project is the pressing preoccupation. This is often a source of inspiration in creative writing. Consider Andrea Barrett's extensive exploration of the history of scientific pursuit and discovery and Elizabeth McCracken's choice to return, again and again, to her own family's letters, photographs, and other ephemera for inspiration. It is also a compelling place for student writers to prompt and examine the creative process. It harnesses natural curiosity, and it acknowledges the multiplicity and fluidity of the creative process, as the student turns close attention to it while it is already in progress. Sinking deeply into the personal intrigue allows writers to situate themselves squarely in the path of wonder, to imagine more fully, and to genuinely write to discover. This is not just for the delight and excitement it can offer the writer, but also for the energy, ingenuity, and narrative momentum it can bring to the completed work. Fostering intellectual curiosity in this way also has significant implications well beyond writing, as it supports students in the larger scope of their academic work. A 2011 study found that a "hungry mind" was just as important as intelligence and effort in academic achievement and that stimulating intellectual curiosity can enhance academic performance (von Stumm, Hell, and Chamorro-Premuzic 582).

At the very outset of the project, as students are choosing a preoccupation, I guide them through a series of writing exercises. They make long lists of oddities, strange facts, unexpected details, and persistent images. They respond to prompts designed to bring forth memories, images, and observations with strong emotional and sensory resonance. Each student's writing creates a sort of personal cabinet of curiosities to consider before they settle on one to pursue. This deliberate brainstorming emphasizes to all students the importance of considering possibilities, and prompts more neurons to respond and engage in the associative process. Given the demands of a semester, students often have to settle on ideas quickly, so they can move on to drafting and revising. Upending that notion early on prepares them for the pacing of a lengthier consideration of ideas and development before writing.

When they begin to explore their personal preoccupations, I encourage them to investigate, as German physicist Helmholtz advocates, "in all directions" (qtd. in Wallas 80), and to pay no concern to story. They are to simply gravitate toward their intrigue. To foreground this process, I give them some basic details about the neuroscience of creativity and insight. We also examine the kind of information gathering students are to do as fiction writers, which requires them to think about sources in very different ways than they might in other academic pursuits. In discussing the writing and research for "Love and Hydrogen," a short story set on the Hindenburg, Jim Shepard makes an important distinction regarding his knowledge about airships: "I was struck by the immensity of the ship's scale, which I'd known about intellectually but hadn't experienced viscerally" (424). To

this end, I urge students to pay special attention to sources that evoke a sensory experience or give insight into the nuanced details of a human experience.

A main challenge of this exploration is identifying what kinds of sources will allow for that visceral experience, or at least help writers sidle up close to it. So, using an example of a curiosity that I bring in—something that has high potential for intrigue—we discuss the variety of research methods we could employ in order to investigate it thoroughly. This includes the traditional means of library and internet research as well as experiential research. Graeme Harper's "Research in Creative Writing" in *Teaching Creative Writing* offers a thorough look at research methods in creative writing. I encourage students to engage in conversations, shadowing, recording memories or observations, and first-hand experiences. We brainstorm potential primary sources for that particular topic, regardless of availability and feasibility, and then—after generating a substantial list—consider how we might realistically get as close to those sources as possible. We also address information literacy issues relevant to the creative writer.

Students create and populate an archive that documents this research experience. The form of the archive is individual to the student based on the preoccupation and/or the student's learning style. The archive might be an interactive Google map with detailed pins, a blog with letters, photographs, and audio interviews, or an information and inspiration board. The archive is a place to record and collect, as well as to reflect. This offers students an opportunity to process their explorations and demonstrate the depth and breadth of their research. I make clear that the archive is to serve their creative process and, as a result, it need not be a polished product. Students share and discuss these archives with one another toward the end of the semester, offering a glimpse into the highly idiosyncratic path of each individual's creative thinking.

Once students have a strong foundation of exploration, we formally turn our attention to finding and shaping the fiction. Students complete another series of in-class writing exercises that encourage them to unearth what might have narrative promise. They start with open-ended prompts, then exercises become more directive and focused. Their responses are quick bursts of writing that ask them to examine their findings from varying angles and experiment with ways they might begin to work toward character and conflict. Students connect discoveries, highlight and develop striking images, and weave facts with characters, desire, and conflict. We spend significant time discussing the possibilities and, in an anecdotal way, we begin to witness some evidence of the neurological process in the connections that lead to a flourish of inspiration, and the seemingly haphazard way of stumbling upon something in the exploration settles with other areas of thought to create a compelling idea for fiction.

PILOT STUDY

The pilot study took place during the fourth iteration of the course and in the Spring of 2017. It involved fourteen undergraduate students who focused their various research projects on a wide range of topics: gender and sexuality in Victorian England, the production of reality television programming, sex addiction in young women, cultures, values, and norms in North Korea, high security psychiatric prisons, lighthouses and their keepers, anxiety and depression in young women, relationship dynamics as they relate to women in crisis, the yellow fever outbreak in New Orleans in 1853, anarchism, the effects of criticism on artists, the Dust Bowl, mistreatment of patients in the history of psychiatric institutions, and personal and societal perspectives of evil.

In addition to the work described above, students wrote a series of reflections. These included responses at various points in the process regarding three main components. They wrote 1) reflections on their evolving topics, with one at the start of the process, another after substantial research, and a third at the end, 2) responses to their experiences engaging in writing exercises and other activities that encouraged them to explore their topics and the fictional possibilities in their research, and 3) responses to prompts that encouraged them to engage in metacognitive reflection on the emphasis on the early stages, both while they were in the midst of the project and after they completed it.

Writers' reflective narratives offer useful information, but they are not without their faults. Indeed, writers' self-reports can be, as Wendy Bishop notes, "a highly engaging, yet fallible, source of information about the writing process . . . offer[ing] moments of insight into the writers' composing processes as well as frustrating contradiction about what writers actually do" (16). Though "complicated and semi-obsured," Bishop argues that it is worth looking at self-reports for what they can illuminate, and this is particularly true when these insights are combined with other avenues of research (18). In this study, students' narratives also demonstrated varying abilities to reflect metacognitively on their process, and this was complicated by the fact that some connections are made outside of conscious awareness. Still, these narratives offer valuable insight into some limited aspects of students' processes, and, coupled with knowledge about the biological processes that lead to insight, suggest ways we can support the work of the early stages.

The analysis that follows details the significant findings from the pilot study. While the analysis should be considered preliminary due to the relatively small number of students involved, the findings are promising and suggest that further work, including replication of the study, would be beneficial.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Understanding the nature and organization of neurons and the creative process, it seems to follow that the more elements there are, the richer the potential to create apt, unexpected and meaningful combinations. Students are, essentially, stocking their neurons with a supply of details that become part of the raw material used to find potential associations when creative problem solving. This seems vital for idea generation, as well as the processes they engage in during idea development and drafting. Additionally, reaching outside of their day-to-day experience helps to change their context, potentially facilitating insight. Research shows that the benefits of incubation require abstaining from voluntary conscious thought about the creative problem, so the usefulness of the details of their exploration as a way to change context is perhaps most pointed very early in the process, when the details are still new and not yet a part of the creative problem. Additionally, the breadth of student research may provide more to think about, as some lines of inquiry become irrelevant to the creative problem, but still provide fodder for thought outside their day-to-day experiences.

Indeed, nearly every student in the pilot study identified a source from their exploration that in some way ignited their imagination and became the “germ of the story,” as Cowley writes, that detail “that serves as a focal point for a hitherto disorganized mass of remembered material in the author’s mind” (7). This is distinct from sources that were particularly important for the factual information they provided. For instance, one student was inspired by witnesses’ first-hand accounts of the Yellow Fever outbreak in New Orleans in 1853. She wrote of a specific description that struck her: “This led to the central question[s]: who was the woman watching the fires? Why was she impassive? Who stood beside her, and what was his reaction to this?” Another student described how searching for “female centric” essays led her to one that particularly resonated for her. She was exploring women in crisis and had a character in mind, one whom she had attempted to write about before but never managed to develop. She wrote, “this essay plugged its way into the open holes and spidering cracks that seemed to be riddling [my] idea . . . [and became] a catalyst for the development of all my future drafts.” In particular, she noted that one line in the essay “immediately resonated with me and caused the dam to break, so to speak, on my stagnating idea, and I knew where to begin.”

Several students described the way details that were resurrected from memory and those that were gathered in other aspects of their daily lives interacted with the information they were taking in during research, suggesting the neural process at work. The student interested in the Yellow Fever outbreak connected her research to a setting in a novel she had read years ago, and which then inspired a particular detail of the setting in her own novella. A student working on a project that took place during the Dust Bowl began looking into how faith and thoughts about God factored into people’s experiences at that time. He went on to describe the way the sensory experience of a walk early in Spring lead to important discoveries:

With the arrival of spring, I saw a certain kind of magic begin to take over the world, and I was disappointed that my story was not naturally having any of that magic within, and so I started to add some in little pieces . . .

This, he goes on to write, led to the development of two god-like characters that were significant to his novella, and the realization that “something as simple as a walk outside had that intensely profound effect on my inner dialogue, as well as my writing.” He also experienced a sudden realization about the relationship between his studies in physics class on black body radiation and the actions of one of these god-like characters, and used that information to more fully develop the character.

Certainly, that walk in early Spring and the lesson on black body radiation in physics class were not a formal part of his exploration, but his insights about their connection to specific aspects of the development of his fiction suggests the possibility of a broader reach in the activation of neurons. It also demonstrates the sort of readiness of the mind suggested by Seifert’s research—that the problems of the fiction primed him to filter his experiences through the lens of those problems, looking for solutions, even when not consciously engaged in doing so.

Attention to the early stages of the creative process proved crucial to story development for the students involved in the pilot study. Eight of the fourteen students changed their topic of focus considerably. Some of this grew naturally out of the process of research and narrowing ideas. One student, for example, began researching famous murder cases but, she noted, “nothing really caught my eye until I saw that one of the murderers I came across was being held in the Ashworth Hospital, a high-security psychiatric hospital in England . . . I think that after this search I have definitely developed a more focused insight on my interest; that being cases involving psychiatric instances and high levels of mystery.” Other students simply found their area of inquiry did not hold the kind of spark for them necessary to translate it into fiction. As a result, some shifts were more dramatic.

Students also indicated a strong sense of internal motivation as a result of this time to explore, mull, winnow out, and reconsider before writing. For instance, one student who began researching movie adaptations of real life horrific events, but ended up delving into the topic of sex addiction wrote:

I came to the realization that the topic I had chosen, while still interesting to me, wasn’t right for me. This taught me that although something [may] intrigue you or draw you in, it may just be a topic of interest and may not lead you into something bigger. It also showed me that perhaps there was another topic out there that could bare more fruit creatively, which I later learned to be true.

She went on to write of the topic she settled on, “it was the first time that I truly felt connected and inspired by what I was considering writing about, which is absolutely what led to the successful completion of this story.” Another student noticed the momentum in her writing, citing that her

research “created an excitement in me that I had long been hoping for.” She continued, “Without the time to wonder about a single online source—too vague to help, I thought—I would not have read the line that seemed to be the missing link I needed. Now, I have an abundance of possibilities for future plot. . . The time we took allowed me to find my way and not substitute or eliminate something that I was passionate about.” Making more time for incubation and the trial and error inherent in that process allowed for this delay in the creative process, facilitating a deeper connection between writer and material.

Writing exercises, which involved taking risks and experimenting before settling on an idea, also helped to guide students through an early facet of the process that may come naturally to some writers, but that many student writers often do not have the time or guidance to engage in. One student wrote, “Before starting [the writing exercises] I didn’t have a specific direction that I was thinking of going in when I did research for my topic . . . [but during the exercises] characters for my story came up that I had never even thought about before but loved. From then on, I could really picture the story coming together in my head.” Another student found the process gave him clarity in moving forward: “This exercise also made me realize that I have not really wrapped my head around a location . . . This is where I want my thought process to go next, as I think it will allow me to really envision the path my story will take afterward.” For this student, the deliberate experimentation set him up for a more focused and informed launch into the first draft.

Still another student described the benefits of the ability to shift course when the writing process offered up an unexpected discovery. He had expected to write about one character, but he wrote about another “seemingly on accident.” He continued, “no matter how hard I tried to keep her a static character, she hollered at me . . . to keep her spirit alive in this story . . . Crucial in fostering my ability to let go of [the other character] was my exploration and research.”

The developmental workshops students engaged in early in the drafting process—five pages in and half way through the manuscript—were also beneficial. For each workshop, students prepared a brief statement to accompany their writing, focusing on their intentions and any issues with which they were grappling. Both of these sessions were designed to encourage students to take a more active role in their own workshop, to be more deliberate in their thinking about the groundwork they were laying, and to be open to the possibilities moving forward. Students gave feedback in the form of sharing initial impressions, posing questions, and brainstorming possibilities. In these workshops, I often witnessed a version of collective combinatory work. As peers provided feedback, other details, facts, or character ideas would surface in the writer’s mind and the writer would often share these, bringing the group into the process of association and connection. The workshops, then, offered experiences in which students engaged in and witnessed the active navigation of the creative process.

Several students described the way this feedback—mid-drafting—provided important insights in the development of their fiction. One student learned that his topic was a popular one, perhaps even clichéd, and delved deeper into the research to find details that would lead to fiction that had fewer “easy and predicable turns.” Another student, lost as to where she might go with the latter half of her novella, discovered that she wanted to maintain some of the uncertainty present in our discussion of her work, and the development workshop helped her “come out with an ending [she] was happy with.”

It will likely come as no surprise that student drafts were strong on authenticity. This, of course, is a direct result of extensive and meaningful research. However, I also found that their fiction was more nuanced, and the craft was rendered with more restraint. In parsing their narratives, I saw this was a result of slowing down the phase of idea generation in order to explore. For instance, a student writing about lighthouses was drawn to the topic because it had been “romanticized” in her mind. In an initial narrative about her interest, she reported that she thought of lighthouses this way: “They are beacons of light, of hope and reassurance, that guided ships safely along the shoreline.” An early story idea involved a ship lost at sea, and a drawing out of this obvious symbol. However, as she researched, she began to push against this romantic notion, and she ended up writing a story with the kind of complexity of character and circumstance that went well beyond easy metaphors.

The student who researched high security psychiatric prisons followed this line of inquiry to research some of the illnesses of inmates in these prisons. She came to an understanding about the complexity of the individual’s experience and the need to translate this into the creation of her own characters and conflicts. She wrote:

I was turning this disorder into something for my own entertainment purposes. This was part of the reason I wanted to change up the ending of my manuscript to get rid of [the main character] having an “evil” side to him. Instead, I would still keep the multiple personalities to the character but take out the murderous aspect to him. For the final draft, I toned down the symptoms of the disorder and added a reasoning behind it.

She went on to write that the process she engaged in to write this novella helped her understand that “not every story had to be left with a giant, climatic ending that involved some kind of death. Something simple could be just as satisfying.”

While this shift in focus to the early stages of the process helped students to be aware of and better navigate these stages, and resulted in some meaningful and well-crafted fiction, it is not without its problems. Some students found the self-directed nature of research made it easy to put off the work. As a result, some students presented archives—and final projects—that missed some crucial opportunities. Additionally, several students found that the amount of information they gathered sometimes became overwhelming, offering too many possibilities for fiction. Indeed, there

are ways to attempt to address these issues. More frequent review of archives might help with those putting off the work. More frequent in-class exercises and small group discussions might allow students overwhelmed with the amount of information to better process the material and begin to explore tentative story ideas earlier. Still, these concerns speak to the variables and unknowns inherent in a creative process unfolding for individual writers. Devising ways to identify these stalls early on in order to address them in productive ways, either individually or as part of the group's larger learning process about the unwieldy nature of creativity, is important.

Negotiating students' varying abilities to reflect metacognitively on their process is also a concern. While the assigned narratives prompt this sort of reflection, some students were able to articulate their thoughts more precisely than others. Additionally, the narratives required an active engagement with this sort of reflection consistently throughout the process—not just when writing the narratives. As a result, more frequent journaling or freewriting, which students consult as they write their narratives, may help increase the writer's understanding of this elusive aspect of the process and strengthen the quality and quantity of information in the narratives.

Even with these issues, formalizing what comes before committing words to the page offers students support and guidance in the process of engaging in intellectual curiosity and in the vagaries of translating their interests into fiction. They become aware of the richness of the work that takes place before the writing, and they consider the ways intellectual curiosity can help them be an active and engaged part of that process. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, students become models—for themselves and each other—of what it really means to trust the process.

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